

**Title:** Arts Councils, policy-making and 'the local'

**Authors' names:** Dr Victoria Durrer, Dr Abigail Gilmore, Dr David Stevenson

**Corresponding author:** Dr David Stevenson, dstevenson@qmu.ac.uk

### **Abstract**

In the British Isles, national policies for the arts are primarily viewed as the responsibility of arts councils with statutory duties to distribute state funding that meet the requirements of both 'arms-length' principles and national strategic frameworks. This paper explores the tensions between policy making for the nation-state and for 'the local' through comparative research on the arts councils (and equivalent bodies) in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Drawing on policy analysis and in-depth qualitative interviews with senior representatives from these organisations, it explores their notions of, responsibilities to and affiliations with 'the local', particularly in relation to institutional partnerships and their perceived relevance to local strategies for the arts. Findings suggest that despite their different models and relationships to the nation-state, and the disparities in the scale of investment, these national policy bodies commonly rely on networked governance to facilitate their relationship to 'the local' thus reproducing national interests, limiting the localised agency of place-based approaches and contributing to a culture of competition within cultural policy (Mould, 2018).

### **Keywords:**

cultural policy, local authorities, arts councils, cultural democracy, devolution

### **Introduction**

This paper is part of a collaborative comparative study on the UK and the Republic of Ireland, which explores the relationships between national arts policy and notions of 'the local'. In the context of the devolved nations and devolving regions of the United Kingdom (UK), this paper shares the first stage findings of our study. Through qualitative research with relevant senior officers in Scotland, England and Northern Ireland (NI), the paper examines how the two arts councils and Creative Scotland understand and articulate their relationship to 'the local'. The research aims to establish the main mechanisms, processes and relationships by which these arm's length agencies manage their activity at local level. In doing so, the paper considers the tensions inherent in national bodies whose value is judged on their work within localities (since artistic creation, funding and development are all ultimately situated practices), and the challenges they face when functioning at this level.

This paper is concerned with the implementation of cultural policy, understood as a form of public policy practice orientated towards a distinct group of social agents and actions that might commonly include the arts and creative industries (Bell & Oakley, 2015). The arts council model is a dominant mechanism of such policy making, argued to be conducted at arm's length from state intervention (Upchurch, 2016). However, an alternative perspective expands the scope of cultural policy to include all actions taken by a state that affect the cultural life of its citizens (Gray, 2010). In this regard, the 'cultural policy' of any country might best be understood as the combination of implicit and explicit, (Ahearne, 2009) or indirect and direct (DiMaggio, 1983) policy processes. One criticism of such processes is that the majority are governed by state and quasi-state bodies who are removed from the

localities on which their work impacts, leading to accusations that those responsible for policy making actively neglect the possibility of cultural democracy, particularly at local level (Upchurch, 2016; Jancovich, 2015). As O'Brien & Miles note, a more place-sensitive lens can address the tendency to "offer something of a blanket critique of cultural policy with recourse to its local practices" (2010, p.3). 'Place-based' working includes a range of approaches to bring together multiple partnerships over extended time periods: it is "more than just a term to describe the target location of funding it also describes a style and philosophy of approach which seeks to achieve 'joined-up' systems change" (Lankelly Chase, 2017, p. 7). As this paper identifies, there are national cultural policy initiatives that target 'the local' explicitly to enhance democratic participation, however the proportion allocated to such programmes is a relatively tiny part of national budgets, and there are tensions and confusions over how to define and benchmark this kind of approach.

Within the UK, this critique is further complicated by the nature of its 'state of unions' with England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales having differing arrangements of devolved power in relation to one another and within each region (Mitchell, 2006). Devolution, in the UK context, has thus been described as 'asymmetrical' and 'lopsided', with the Westminster-based central government responsible for a residual mix of UK-wide and England-specific functions, leaving the 'territorial' nations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales existing in a "modified and truncated guise as conduits for intergovernmental relations between the UK and devolved political arenas" (Jeffrey & Wincott, 2006, p. 4). England dominates the UK's population as well as gross domestic product (Harari & Ward, 2019) in addition to much parliamentary decision-making and UK-wide cultural policy research. However, recent work shows the importance of looking at specific policy areas within the different devolved regions. While they may share common cultural and state-based logics, amidst the backdrop of changing socio-economic and political conditions they diverge, reflecting different values and practices in relation to, and of, 'the local' (Mackinnon, 2015; Stevenson, 2014; Birrell, 2008). Yet, there has been little research to establish the patterns and effects of national and local cultural policies in action, and their relationships to these dominant discourses. As such, this paper explores how these tensions may play out in the policies of arts councils within the UK's nations and regions.

## **Methodology**

A comparative case study approach is employed to analyse the relationships of Creative Scotland (CS), Arts Council Northern Ireland (ACNI) and Arts Council England (ACE) with 'the local'. While we acknowledge the different approaches, particularly in Scotland, to the notion of an 'arts council', we employ this term throughout for brevity. In approaching the study, each of the three regions were understood as a distinct 'policy community'. While acknowledging critiques of territoriality in state policy analysis (Paasi, 2002), Northern Ireland, Scotland and England have here been defined in territorial ways to account for the different nature of devolution existing in each region (Keating *et al.*, 2009; Birrell, 2009). This perspective is not intended to ignore the extent to which the arts policy communities of each nation are inextricably and trans-territorially linked (Keating *et al.*, 2009) as part of the UK and Irish regions through ties that are economic, social, cultural and political. While important to understanding devolution in cultural policy, consideration of these ties is beyond this study's scope. Fieldwork took place in 2017

with each member of the research team<sup>ii</sup> taking responsibility for the data generation and initial analysis of a specific nation.

For this paper, we draw on data from nine semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with senior representatives from each of the arts councils, or equivalent. Interviews followed a common interview guide (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) consisting of generative questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) constructed to encourage an extended response from interviewees and rich description of the relationships between their organisation and 'the local'. Questions concerned the practices and experience of these representatives, relating to the strategies and mechanisms, roles and responsibilities, processes, histories and futures of, and national structures for, the arts councils' relationships to 'the local'. They opened up discussions where the interviewees were able to define their own approaches to place-based work. Interviewees were selected according to the principle of exposure (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) on the basis that they had "experiential relevance" (Rudestam & Newton, 2015) to the current study. As the aim of the data generation was to establish an 'official' account of practice, interviewees were understood as organisational representatives. As such, interview data is not attributed to any specific interviewee, and quotes should be understood as encapsulating the institutional account of these relationships. Interviews were transcribed in detail and analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Analysis was informed by corresponding reviews of organisational policies and strategies and wider literature on the socio-economic and political context for each region. This allowed us to contextualise the differences in scale, population and geography between the nations under comparison, and consider their different priorities, histories and correspondingly models for cultural policy, investment, and governance.

### **Scotland**

In Scotland, there is no arts council. On the 1 July 2010 the devolved Scottish Arts Council was dissolved, and a new cultural development body called Creative Scotland (CS) was established (Scottish Parliament, 2009). Although CS has offices in Edinburgh and Glasgow, there is no structure of formal sub-national governance and all activity is conducted by a single centralised team, led by a group of directors, and organised into a series of 'specialisms'<sup>iii</sup> As a government funded agency, CS is required to align activities with the Scottish Government's (SG) sixteen National Outcomes. As such, one of the priorities stated in CS's Annual Report is to "work in partnership with local authorities and others to help communities transform through creativity" (2016, p.19).

Although per capita arts expenditure in Scotland by CS increased from £7.16 in 1998/99 to around £8.72 in 2014/15 (House of Commons Library, 2016, p. 9), local authorities have seen their statutory culture budgets cut in real-terms by £44m (4.6%) between 2011 and 2016, although not in the metropolitan areas of Glasgow and Edinburgh which saw increases (Audit Scotland, 2019). When asked if CS had an obligation to directly mitigate reductions in local authority spending, all interviewees were resolute that this was not their role. Indeed, interviewees stressed that CS was not there to simply hand out funds. They argued that focusing solely on the locations that CS financially supports would overlook the full spectrum of their relationships with 'the local'. They saw the role of CS as being about "helping a place to do what they want to do, rather than impose what Creative Scotland wants them to do on top of it" (personal communication, 2017). They understood CS as a "catalyst" for

local partnerships in which CS “connect people and put them together” (personal communication, 2017) in order to try and “develop and strengthen the local infrastructure” (personal communication, 2017) and taking into account “the local ecology” (personal communication, 2017). This was understood as important because of a belief that in certain locations, even if CS had more money to distribute, “there currently isn’t the capacity or infrastructure there to fund” (personal communication, 2017).

The work of the Place Team is the most specifically oriented towards a local level, not least because this team had the most regular and strategic relationship with local authorities. However, the majority of local authorities were reducing the amount of resources (financial and otherwise) committed to culture, with a few “entrenching down into core services and ignoring what they see as ‘add-ons’” (personal communication, 2017). As such, the relationship with local government was rarely the only one that CS were cultivating in any particular geographic area. These other “ad-hoc” “softer relationships” (personal communication, 2017) could be with individuals such as chief executives, councillors, arts officers, and artists, or they may be with organisational structures such as specific local authority departments, professional arts organisations, cultural trusts<sup>iv</sup>, voluntary organisations, and other funding bodies. Such variety requires CS staff to “build relationships” (personal communication, 2017) rather than rely upon formal hierarchies, procedures, and transactional interactions.

However, no formal expectation exists about the quantity, quality and nature of relationships that CS should have in each area, and such decisions are left to individual staff discretion. Although all interviewees were committed to CS serving all of Scotland they recognised that the scope and nature of activity happening at a local level was constrained by pragmatic factors such as the total number of staff at CS, the size of the Place Team (two people), and the geography of Scotland. As such, the number and nature of these relationships varies across the thirty-two local authority areas and all of the interviewees acknowledged that CS had stronger connections with some areas than others. Due to the constraints in resources, significant importance is placed on identifying the “right people” and having a good relationship with “the person and organisations that [they] know can get things done” (personal communication, 2017). This appears to result in those areas where relevant actors were particularly proactive in seeking the input of CS being more likely to receive reciprocal attention.

Each of the interviewees stressed that all of CS’s funding can be understood as local, the difference is that with each strand of funding “you take the local into consideration in a different way” (personal communication, 2017). Regular funding is the most long-term subsidy available from CS and in 2017 Regularly Funded Organisations (RFO) were present in 21 out of 32 local authority areas, although 80% of these operate beyond their home location (Creative Scotland, 2016). In addition to RFO funding and Open Project Funding<sup>v</sup>, CS also has a number of targeted funds and of these it was Place Partnerships, Creative Place Awards<sup>vi</sup>, Youth Arts Hubs, the Youth Music Initiative, the Creative Learning Network, and the Visual Artists and Craft Makers Awards that interviewees identified as being particularly ‘local’ in their conception and delivery.

Interviewees mostly highlighted the Place Partnerships programme<sup>vii</sup> as something that is distinctive in the UK. Interviewees described it as an “organic” development intended to do what arts councils traditionally couldn’t or wouldn’t do. The program is not intended to support immediate activity as, “it is a strategic development program and not a local grant programme” (personal communication, 2017). As such, it offers £200,000 of matched funding to local “networks” in order to support them to “plan and implement strategic activities that will result in a step-change in the way that culture works in the locality” (personal communication, 2017). All of the interviewees described Place Partnerships as being “long term interventions” intended to “raise capacity” and “develop infrastructure” at a local level. They have no fixed duration, although theoretically they are intended to last three years. Prospective partners are invited to apply and although the majority of partnerships are led by the local authority, the plan must be “worked out and agreed with the local creative community” as “the local authority can’t work in isolation” (personal communication, 2017). As at the outset of each partnership CS do not know what the network will use the funding for, they need to “trust them to collectively come up with something that they will value” (personal communication, 2017). CS views its facilitation of these networks as a way to help local authorities better understand what is important to the local cultural sector, and to see that “the local authority are not the only people that should be expected to be delivering a cultural strategy” (personal communication, 2017).

## **England**

A 10-year strategic framework (ACE, 2013) guides the activities of Arts Council England (ACE). At time of writing, this framework is under review for the next policy cycle beginning 2020. The current framework sets out five strategic goals: excellence; access (“for everyone”); resilience and sustainability; finance and skills; and children and young people. Each of these are articulated within separate art form plans, intended to thread through activities at area level (ACE, 2018). Following the election of the coalition government in 2010 and its policy axing Museums Libraries and Archives (MLA), ACE gained new responsibilities for museums and libraries while simultaneously losing fifty percent of its administrative budget. As a result, the broad remit of ACE is now to support “great” art, museums and libraries, organised under the classifications of collections, combined arts, dance, libraries, literature, music, theatre, and visual arts (ACE 2018). An Executive Board that oversees corporate strategy leads the organisation, which includes five Directors each responsible for different strategic goals. The Deputy Chief executive specifically leads on local government, devolution and place-making.

ACE operates with regional offices for London, the South East, the South West, the North and the Midlands. The Executive Board provides a link between the National Council, which governs ACE’s charitable objectives, and the Area Councils that provide the forum for “expertise and grass roots knowledge of local issues to help [us] create and implement [our] strategy” (Arts Council England, n.d.) for example, through advocacy of regional events such as the Great Exhibition of the North and Hull City of Culture 2017 (ACE, 2016). The Area Councils are also collectively responsible for grant decisions for ACE’s regularly funded arts organisations, the National Portfolio, reset in 2018 to include museums and libraries and introduce further specialist funding streams and development funds (ACE, 2018).

The longer and well-documented history of ACE, emerging from Arts Council Great Britain (ACGB) as a non-statutory, 'arms-length' body (Upchurch, 2016; Hewison, 1997, Gray, 2000), is characterised by ongoing restructuring, expansion of remit (which now include museums and libraries) and tension between a centralised, national and regional strategy. The most recent restructuring significantly diminished alignment with the nine English regions, and reduced organisational capacity for relationships with local authorities. Interviewees suggested tensions are particularly acute in three aspects: declining funding and capacity for leadership from local authorities for non-statutory public services; increasing disparity of arts funding across localities in England, and in particular the non-metropolitan regions; new methodologies for place-based funding in response to political decentralisation, city-regional devolution and the UK Industrial Strategy. These concerns are reflected in recent statistics on the distribution of arts funding. The amount of overall arts expenditure by ACE (including grant-in-aid and lottery) increased between 1995 to 2016, from £5.93 to £8.20 per capita (House of Commons Library, 2016, p. 5). However these data hide the real-terms cuts to arts funding from other sources, and the significant differences of investment between places, in particular when comparing investment in London with the regions, even with the boost provided by National Lottery monies and taking into account local government spend (Stark et al 2013; NLGN, 2016)<sup>viii</sup>.

Commitment to 'the local' is formally articulated through partnerships with a diverse range of "strategic" bodies operating at local, regional and national levels. These are defined through particular sectoral and art-form relationships (e.g. Creative England, the British Film Council, the Heritage Lottery Fund), but are also rendered legitimate through attachments (Gray, 2002) to other public policy priorities, such as economic development and tourism with Local Enterprise Partnerships (through targeted strategic programmes, such as Cultural Destinations and the Creative Local Growth scheme) and responsive to particular place characteristics (e.g. the Forestry Commission, Canals and Rivers Trust).

Although local authorities often broker these partnerships and whilst formally, local government "remains our most important strategic and delivery partner" (ACE, 2018), relationships with all 260 English authorities are hard to maintain as both ACE staff numbers and local authority capacity have been significantly reduced over recent years. Local authorities are collectively the most significant public investor in the arts across the UK, and funding cuts to non-statutory services and infrastructure have been identified as "the single biggest issue facing the sector at present" (CMS, 2016: p.x). However, interviewees confirm that the arms-length principle presents an ideological barrier to directly addressing these funding gaps, since remedial funding would constitute an intervention into local political decision-making (NLGA/ACE 2016).

Instead, the strategy of ACE is to provide training for elected members in local government on advocacy and "case making" (personal communication, 2017) for the arts and culture in order that the sector can more effectively compete for resources while simultaneously managing change and decline. This indicates the extent to which ACE's approach to 'the local' is based on a paternalistic duty to support artistic development through guidance, support and relationship management. This narrative proposes 'the local' as differentiated, with a clear assumption that there cannot be a mechanism that supports a more egalitarian and

democratic approach to place-based funding than “case-by-case” assessments aligned with wider strategic goals (NLGA/ACE 2016). The resultant unevenness that this approach engenders was recently highlighted in the Select Committee enquiry, *Countries of Culture*, (CMS, 2016), one in a series of public debates on the regional distribution of resources (see also Stark *et al*, 2013)<sup>ix</sup>.

Rejecting a standardised approach to place, interviewees emphasised their role in brokerage and mediation: “We want local government’s investment to work well. As a national development agency, we can invest at scale to support local authorities to realise opportunity (personal communication, 2017). Other strategies for rebalancing arts offers within localities rely on bringing work and expertise from other places, through touring and outreach, boosted by innovation in digital technologies, seen to enable distribution from the (highly funded) metropolitan centre out to the regions (e.g. through live-streaming to local cinema). The high profile national programme, *Creative People and Places*, further aims to address demand-side inequalities, targeting areas identified as suffering participation deficits with lower-than-national average engagement (usually correlating with indices of socio-economic deprivation) for projects that are intended to “capacity-build” (personal communication, 2017) in partnership with local third sector, community groups, arts organisations and local authorities.

The English city-region devolution agenda is also changing the terms and conditions through which ACE negotiate and collaborate with local partnerships in pursuit of broader social and economic outcomes. For example, in Greater Manchester (the first devolved city-region) the devolution of health and social care requires collaboration with a complex and diverse range of partners in relation to cultural commissioning (NEF, 2016). The Industrial Strategy (BEIS, 2017) and sector deal for creative industries (Bazalgette, 2018) also emphasise new institutional models for place-based approaches, presenting a new curatorial role for ACE in which emphasising relationships with local authorities in relation to ‘the local’ “feels...old fashioned” (personal communication, 2017) as other institutional partnerships, including those with the private sector, become critical to diversifying both political interests and funding models.

## **Northern Ireland**

Arts Council Northern Ireland (ACNI) became a statutory body through the AC(NI) Order 1995 (Article 6). Its functions in relation to the arts include:

“developing ... knowledge, appreciation and practice; increasing public access ...and participation ...; and advising the Department for Communities and other government departments, district councils and bodies ...” (ACNI, 2018a, p. 15).

Currently directed by a Board, ACNI’s work is structured across the visual arts, music, drama and literature, and community/participatory arts (ACNI, 2018b). It funds both core organisations and individual artists in addition to specialist streams of activity. Research and policy development are also key areas of practice (ACNI, 2018a; ACNI 2013; ACNI 2017a).

Three factors underpin the work of ACNI regarding ‘the local’. Firstly, what constitutes the ‘arts’ is not clearly defined in the AC(NI) Order (1995). Such ambiguity

facilitates both flexibility and uncertainty regarding the role of ACNI generally as well as in relation to what their 'local' role is understood to be. Furthermore, the complex nature of addressing citizen's broader cultural rights in post-conflict NI particularly complicates arts development in the region (Ramsey & Waterhouse, 2018). In ACNI policy, 'the local', appears explicitly in relation to voluntary arts (ACNI 2013, p. 4, 11), indicated as a pathway for engagement in and with publicly funded arts activity. Notions of 'placemaking' and 'place-based initiatives', while somewhat present in policy rhetoric (ACNI, 2018) are not as prevalent a feature in ACNI rhetoric as they were found to be in Scotland and England.

Secondly, the scope of ACNI is significantly shaped by Executive level policies and the wider socio-economic and political landscape of NI. While considerable progress has been made since 1998, the region still sees much political impasse, economic challenges, and social inequality, all related to concerns regarding the quality of life, health, and wellbeing of its citizens (NI Executive, 2017; Tinson, 2016; DoE, 2015). As such, ACNI policy expresses 'the local' as a site where economic and social outcomes are realised through 'outreach', made manifest in arts programmes for older people, people with disabilities and children and young people as well as intercultural arts and arts-based peace and reconciliation programmes (ACNI, 2017a).

Finally, uncertainty and precarity characterises government, public administration and ACNI more specifically, positioning ACNI and the sector in a state of almost perpetual crisis management, which undoubtedly impacts the body's relationship to 'the local' (ACNI, 2018a; ACNI, 2017a). ACNI's own expert status and stability has been questioned within a wider Executive level review of arm's length bodies (ACNI, 2017a) as well as through public disagreements between staff and the Board's Chair (Leonard, 2018). Successive austerity measures since at least 2012 and the absence of a sitting government since January 2017 risk sustainability of the subsidised arts (NICVA, 2017). Government investment overall has fallen around 40% with ACNI obtaining only "£5.31 per capita compared with £10.03 in Wales and £12.79 in the Republic of Ireland" in 2016/17 (Annabel Jackson Associates, Ltd., 2018, p. 5, 6). Smaller organisations, arguably with more localised remits, have suffered most with some closing, partly at the expense of maintaining flagship institutions. With additional austerity measures planned, the language of ACNI's next strategy consultation is imbued with insecurity, referring to 'frameworks' for action to "manage uncertainty" in a "flexible way" (ACNI, 2018a, p. 3).

Remaining "the only fully functioning democratically elected government in Northern Ireland" since the collapse of the Assembly (Breen, 2019, np) the relationship of ACNI to local authorities is a critical entry point into 'the local' for the Arts Council. Described as a "long-standing partner" (ACNI, 2013, p. 16) in supporting "arts development and provision", ACNI's work with local government is at once legislatively and historically based. ACNI's establishing legislation requires regular consultation "with district councils on [its] functions", and representation on ACNI's board (AC(NI) Order, 1995, Article 3(2)). Crucially, when they held little power otherwise, district councils gained statutory authority in culture with the development of services within local government's remit for recreation in the 1970s and 80s, (ACNI, 1978, p.11; HL, 1973; Recreation and Youth Service (NI) Order 1973 and 1986; LG(N) Act, 1972). While this legislative relationship is not oft discussed, engagement with local authorities is explicitly referred to within the remit of ACNI's



Director of Strategic Development (ACNI, 2017a). Furthermore, recent changes to local government powers, including citizen and statutory agency engaged Community Planning (Local Government (NI) Act 2014), are seen to provide newer “enabling” structures as well as an “opportunity to highlight the role of the arts across multiple areas of local authority policy and service provision” (personal communication, 2017). More recently, the emphasis appears to be on providing pragmatic responses to issues around resourcing and promoting “quality” (personal communication, 2017) subsidised arts in the current economic climate.

ACNI engages with ‘the local’ primarily through incentivising, resourcing, and communicating. A primary objective is to encourage consistency and spatial equity in arts access, promotion and funding, however this does not appear to be based on any awareness of need specific to localities. Particular inroads are seen through advocating to local authorities for the recognition of the arts as beneficial across numerous areas of work and for commitment to resourcing ‘quality’ work. Support has also been historically realised through ACNI’s funding incentive to establish local authority-supported arts venues across NI in the 1990s/2000s, which aimed to standardise local cultural offer (ACNI, 1995) and continues through limited funding or co-funding of activities, particularly in the area of outreach. However, in this regard a significant gap in equity across the region persists<sup>x</sup>.

Although there is recognition of the need for a strategic relationship between ACNI and local government (thrive *et al.*, 2018; ACNI, 2018a; AMGNI, 2014) it is currently lacking. When conversations do occur, they are largely informal, dependent on the officers involved, the nature of local government investment in the arts and that of ACNI’s investment within the district (NI1, 2017). A forum established in 1994 between ACNI and local government closed in 2012 partly due to lack of strategic direction, disengagement from elected councillors, and uncertainty brought by austerity and public administration reform (Livingston, 2012). More recently, ACNI’s involvement with the Community Planning processes (promoted as a means for more local participation in policy making) has been limited as ACNI removed itself from the list of statutory bodies with which district councils were required to engage. Although the one-off introduction to all district councils (with the exception of Belfast) of a £1.5 million Lottery funded Local Government Challenge Fund in 2016 presented an opportunity, it was to “inject” rather than “embed” the arts into the Community Planning process (ACNI, 2016, np). The intervention exists largely in a vacuum, with virtually no strategic engagement between ACNI and local authorities since its distribution, nor between local authorities having received the fund.

## **Discussion**

Historically, the purpose of arts councils has been framed as the stewardship of art form excellence. The work they support is understood to transcend the specific geographies of where it is created and/or performed, operating on behalf of the nation-state to promote artistic heritage and cultural diplomacy, and stimulate creative economy, trade and intercultural exchange. However, this qualitative research identifies a common pressure on national organisations to consider ‘the local’ and to develop place-based approaches as a priority. Mounting arguments about the inequitable distribution of support (read: funding) between different geographic areas (Stark *et al.*, 2014) combined with the increasing prevalence of ‘progressive localism’ across the wider political discourse in the UK (Featherstone *et al.*, 2012) has resulted in a need for all UK arts councils to present more explicit and

coherent narratives about how they function at 'sub-national' or 'local' level. This is despite the fact that all of the activity they undertake and work they fund is, by default, local to somewhere and someone.

The arts councils we examine here have divergent national obligations to statutory duties and arms-length principles, and vary significantly in the scale of investment and commitment to working at 'local' levels. The initiatives they invest in which specifically target places include the funding of work in towns, villages or specific areas of cities, of certain types of outreach organisations and capacity building partnerships, or by individual artists adopting particular ways of working that support participation with and by communities. What unites these activities is that they target specific demographic and/or geographic areas that have not historically received significant and/or sustained funding from the national bodies nor explicitly appear to be 'engaged' in 'quality', subsidised arts. Such work is presented as being more culturally democratic, addressing deficiencies, and providing opportunities and recognition to those people and places that have traditionally been overlooked/underserved by national cultural policies. 'The local' is operationalised as a label applied to any activity that can be understood as 'different' from that which the majority of national funding continues to support; 'place' here is a signifier for the problem child.

Despite the arguably redistributive narrative surrounding these activities, the funding and staffing resource explicitly committed to them remains a relatively small percentage of the overall budget of all of the arts councils, limiting their scope and sustainable impact. However, even without such financial constraints, the idea that a national arts funding body can be equally 'present' across the entire geography of a nation is clearly problematic, both functionally and ideologically, for these organisations. As such, specific narratives around place - in particular the binary contrast of 'creative places' (Stevenson & Blanche, 2015) and 'cultural cold spots' (Gilmore, 2013) - have been adopted, at different rates and scales, in order to legitimise why certain locations have been selected to benefit from additional national support. Furthermore, such narratives often adopt the logics of competition, with schemes such as Creative People and Places, the Creative Place Awards, and UK City of Culture requiring places to justify why they are the most 'deserving' of funding on the basis of criteria that embody national, rather than local, priorities.

However, there appears to have been little comprehension of what a place 'is' and how, even if, an institution such as an arts council might seek to have a relationship with it. The humanistic turn in geography has meant that places are no longer

"reducible to a specific locality, 'site', or scale, or specific attributes connected with these (physical or built up environment, culture, social relations) [...] place is not an objectified everyday environment of individuals or an administrative frame [...] but a unique web of social and material spatiotemporal life connections and associated meanings... " (Paasi, 1991, p.248).

Conceiving of place in this manner excludes the potential for national organisations such as an arts council to form a relationship with a place. While their actions may be part of web of activities that inform any individual's sense of place, places are too numerous, fluid, and intersubjective for any national body to seek to strategically

act upon and with. This is arguably why, across the majority of 'local' activities and projects undertaken by arts councils, place appears to be first and foremost understood in geographic terms, what Agnew understands as a location (1987, cited in Paasi, 1991), defined through pre-existing administrative modes of sub-national geographic division such as towns, villages, counties, and local authority areas. These are however proxies for place, the physical settings or "locales" (Agnew, 1979) for the institutional relationships that are necessary for the networked governance of contemporary public policy (Sørensen & Torfing, 2005; Rhodes, 1997) but which can be represented as sufficiently 'local' so as to counteract the persistent accusations of elitism and/or bureaucratic managerialism so often levelled at the existing arms length model.

Within any given geographic area there are simply too many potential places and communities with which to build relationships. As such, arts councils must aggregate interests and identify suitable intermediaries that can claim legitimacy as a proxy for a particular agglomeration of places. In the past, local authorities, with which the arts councils shared institutional kinship, primarily filled this role. However, the processes of devolution within the UK combined with post-2008 crash austerity have led to significant ideological tension, as well as operational dysfunction, as decentralisation of power and accountability is not evenly matched by local authority (or arts council) capacity to manage these administrative relationships. Even with unlimited capacity, however, such relationships can be problematic – because they inevitably tend towards establishing recognisable and reliable structures of governance that best serve the interests of the lead organisation in the network.

In conclusion, this paper finds that when the representatives of arts councils speak of 'place-based working' and building local 'infrastructure' and 'capacity', it is the infrastructure of governance with which they appear to be most concerned, rather than questions of cultural geography and assets. Places are encouraged to adopt specific politically and economically located identities and develop recognisable organisational structures with which institutions such as arts councils are able to interact, and fundamentally to trust. Trust is essential for cooperative behaviour (Rhodes, 2007) and for the legitimacy of governance networks, the likes of which arts councils increasingly rely on to deliver their objectives (Stevenson, 2014). As such, securing national support for 'local' activity becomes as much (if not more) about places creating a vehicle by which they can exhibit organisational and administrative competence as it is about the creative and cultural practices that the people of those places wish to pursue. Furthermore, in order to maintain the integrity of each national network, not all places are able to secure and maintain a position within it. Instead, a culture of competition in cultural policy flourishes (Mould, 2018), exacerbated by these national to local relationships, as places jostle entrepreneurially for the attention of national bodies to secure their inclusion in the network and gain access, influence and control over increasingly limited resources (Gray, 2000). The result being that under the banner of 'devolution' and 'localism', the characteristics, distinctions and attachments of 'the national' are increasingly instituted within 'the local', a transference that at best ignores and at worst distorts the structures of feeling (Williams, 1977) that are constituent elements of any given place and which 'local' cultural policies are notionally intended to support.

## References

- ACE (2013). *Achieving great arts and culture for everyone*. London: Arts Council England
- ACE (2016). Minutes of the Midlands Area Council Meeting No. 19, 6 December 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/our-organisation/area-councils>
- ACE (2018). Delivering our strategy, Arts Council England website, Retrieved from <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/our-mission-and-strategy/delivering-our-strategy#section-1>
- ACE (n.d.) Organisational Structure, Arts Council England website, Retrieved from <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/our-organisation/organisational-structure-0>
- ACNI (1995). *To the millennium: A strategy for the arts in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: ACNI.
- ACNI (2013). *Ambitions for the arts, 2013 – 2018*. Belfast: ACNI.
- ACNI (2016). *Local government challenge fund guidance notes*. Belfast: ACNI.
- ACNI. (2018a). *Inspire, connect, lead: A five year strategic framework for developing the arts 2019-2024, Draft for consultation*. Lisburn: ACNI.
- ACNI (2018b). *ACNI Organisational Chart, July 2018*. Lisburn: ACNI. Retrieved from: <http://www.artscouncil-ni.org/images/uploads/about-documents/ACNI-Organisation-Chart-July-2018.pdf> . ACNI. (1978). *ACNI 35th Annual report 1977/78*. Belfast: ACNI. Retrieved from <http://www.digitaltheatrearchive.com/archives>
- ACNI. (2017a). *Annual review, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 2016 – 17*. Lisburn: ACNI.
- Ahearne, J. (2009). Cultural policy explicit and implicit : a distinction and some uses Cultural policy explicit and implicit : a distinction and some uses. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*. [Online] 15 (2), 141–153.
- Annabel Jackson Associates, Ltd. (2018). *Desk review of ACNI's five year strategic plan, final report*. Bath: Annabel Jackson Associates Ltd. Retrieved from <http://www.artscouncil-ni.org/images/uploads/publications-documents/Desk-review-of-ACNI-Strategy-Final-Report-AJA-2018.pdf>.
- Arts Council (Northern Ireland) Order. No. 1623 (N.I. 8). Retrieved from <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1995/1623>
- Arts Managers Group of Northern Ireland (AMGNI) (2014). *The arts in local government*. Belfast: AMGNI.
- Bazalgette, P. (September 2017). Independent Review of the Creative Industries, Retrieved from [www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-the-creative-industries](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-the-creative-industries)
- Bell, D. & Oakley, K. (2015). *Cultural Policy*. London: Routledge.
- Birrell, D. (2008). Devolution and quangos in the United Kingdom: the implementation of principles and policies for rationalisation and democratisation. *Policy Studies*, 29(1), 35-49.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Breen, S. (2019). Northern Ireland councils demand more powers to fill political void left by Assembly, Belfast Telegraph [online], 12 February. Retrieved from

<https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/northern-ireland-councils-demand-more-powers-to-fill-political-void-left-by-assembly-37806440.html>.]

CMS (2016) Countries of Culture: Funding and support for the arts outside London, Fourth Report of Session 2016–17, London: House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee

Creative Scotland (2016). *Creative Scotland Annual plan 2016-2017*.

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. (2017). *Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain fit for the future* [online] Retrieved from [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf)

Department of Environment (DoE). (2015). Statutory guidance for the operation of community planning Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014. Belfast: DoE. Retrieved from <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-lg-2815-%E2%80%933-statutory-guidance-operation-community-planning>.

DiMaggio, P. (1983). Cultural policy studies: What they are and why we need them. *Journal of Arts Management and Law*, 13 (1), 241–248.

Featherstone, D., Ince, A., Mackinnon, D. , Strauss, K. and Cumbers, A. (2012). Progressive localism and the construction of political alternatives. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37: 177-182

Gilmore, A. (2013). Cold spots, crap towns and cultural deserts: The role of place and geography in cultural participation and creative place-making. *Cultural Trends*, 22(2), 86–96

Gray, C. (2000). *The politics of the arts in Britain*. Basingstoke: MacMillan.<sup>[1]</sup><sub>SEP</sub>

Gray, C. (2010). Analysing cultural policy: incorrigibly plural or ontologically incompatible. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 16 (2), 215–230.

Harari, D. & Ward, M. (2019) Regional and country economic indicators, Briefing Paper No. 06924, 26 February 2019, House of Commons Library, Retrieved from <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06924/SN06924.pdf>

Hewison, R (1997). *Culture and Consensus*. London: Methuen publishing limited

Jancovich, L. (2015). Breaking Down the Fourth Wall in Arts Management: The Implications of Engaging Users in Decision-Making. *International Journal of Arts Management*, 18(1), p.14

Jeffery, C., & Wincott, D. (2006). Devolution in the United Kingdom: statehood and citizenship in transition. *Publius: the journal of federalism*, 36(1), 3-18.

Keating, M., Cairney, P. and Hepburn, E. (2009). Territorial policy communities and devolution in the UK. *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 2, 51–66.

Leonard, V. (2018). Staff turn on Arts Council chair in row over letter 'questioning their even-handedness'. *Belfast Telegraph* [online], 12 October. Retrieved from <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/entertainment/theatre-arts/staff-turn-on-arts-council-chair-in-row-over-letter-questioning-their-evenhandedness-37411246.html>.

Lindlof, T. R. & Taylor, B. C. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Vol. 3. Los Angeles: Sage.

Livingston, N. (2012). Forum for Local Government and the Arts: A position paper prepared by Nick Livingston, Director of Strategic Development, ACNI. February. Belfast: ACNI.

Local Government (NI) Act 1972. Retrieved from <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/apni/1972/9/contents>.

Local Government (NI) Act 2014. Retrieved from <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2014/8/contents>.

MacKinnon, D. (2015). Devolution, state restructuring and policy divergence in the UK. *The Geographical Journal*, 181(1), 47-56

Mitchell, James. 2006. Evolution and devolution: Citizenship, institutions, and public policy. *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 36 (1), 153-168.

Mould, O. (2018). *Against Creativity*. London: Verso

Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) (2017). Results of NICVA's Funding Watch Survey. NICVA [online]. Retrieved from <http://www.nicva.org/article/results-of-nicvas-funding-watch-survey>.

Northern Ireland Executive (2017). *Programme for Government, 2016 – 2012*, Consultation Document. Belfast: NI Executive. Retrieved from <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/programme-government>.

O'Brien, D. & Miles, S. (2010). Cultural policy as rhetoric and reality: a comparative analysis of policy making in the peripheral north of England, *Cultural Trends*, 19 (1-2), 3-13, doi: [10.1080/09548961003695940](https://doi.org/10.1080/09548961003695940)

Ó Maoláin, C. (2018). Arts Council of Northern Ireland unfit for purpose and should be wound up. *The Irish News*. Retrieved from <https://www.irishnews.com/opinion/letterstotheeditor/2018/11/02/news/arts-council-of-northern-ireland-unfit-for-purpose-and-should-be-wound-up-1474600/>

Paasi, A. (2002). Place and region: regional worlds and words. *Progress in Human Geography*, 26(6), 802 – 811.

Ramsey, P., & Waterhouse, B. (2018). Cultural policy in Northern Ireland: Making cultural policy for a divided society. In V. Durrer, T. Miller, & D. O'Brien (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook to global cultural policy* (pp. 195 – 211). Abingdon: Routledge.

Recreation and Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order (1973), No. 961 NI 12.

Recreation and Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order (1986), No. 2232 NI 25.

Rhodes, R. (1997). Understanding governance: Policy networks, governance, reflexivity and accountability. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press

Rhodes, R. (2007). Understanding Governance: Ten Years On. *Organization Studies*, 28(8), 1243–1264.

Rubin, H. & Rubin, I. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: the art of hearing data*. Vol. 2. Thousand Oaks, Calif ; London: Sage.

Rudestam, K.& Newton, R. (2015). *Surviving your dissertation: A comprehensive guide to content and processes*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Schwartz-Shea, P. & Yanow, D. (2012). *Interpretative research design: Concepts and processes*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Scottish Parliament (2009). *Public Service Reform (Scotland) Bill*.

Sørensen, E., & Torfing, J., (2005). Network governance and post-liberal democracy. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 27(2), 197-237

Stevenson, D. (2014) Scottish cultural policy, *Cultural Trends*, 23(3), 133-135.

Stevenson, D. (2014) Tartan and tantrums: critical reflections on the Creative Scotland "stooshie". *Cultural Trends*, 23 (3), pp. 178-187.

Stevenson, D. & Blanche, R. (2015). The town is the venue: "Place-making" at the heart of cultural policy. In Hristova, S., Dragičević Šešić, M. & Duxbury, N. (Eds.), *Culture and sustainability in European cities: Imagining Europolis* (pp. 178-190). Abingdon: Routledge.

Stark, P., Gordon, C., & Powell, D. (2013). Rebalancing our cultural capital. Retrieved from [http://www.gpsculture.co.uk/downloads/rocc/Rebalancing\\_FINAL\\_3mb.pdf](http://www.gpsculture.co.uk/downloads/rocc/Rebalancing_FINAL_3mb.pdf)

Stark, P., Gordon, C., & Powell, D. (2014). The PLACE report: Policy for the lottery, the arts and community in England. Retrieved from [http://www.gpsculture.co.uk/downloads/place/The\\_PLACE\\_report.pdf](http://www.gpsculture.co.uk/downloads/place/The_PLACE_report.pdf)

thrive, Voluntary Arts Ireland and Durrer, V. (2018). *Conversations: Beyond the box ticking*. Belfast: thrive.

Tinson, A. (2016). *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Northern Ireland 2016*. London: New Policy Institute. Retrieved from: <https://www.npi.org.uk/publications/income-and-poverty/monitoring-poverty-and-social-exclusion-northern-ireland-2016/>.

Upchurch, A. (2016). *The origins of the Arts Council Movement: Philanthropy and policy*. London: Palgrave

Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---

<sup>i</sup> The broader study involves research in Wales, and the Republic of Ireland, and also considers further city-regional devolution in England; for interests of brevity, this article focuses on comparison of three nations.

<sup>ii</sup> Thanks to Ruth Melville who conducted some of the interviews in England and to all of the interviewees.

<sup>iii</sup> These specialisms are: Creative Industries; Creative Learning; Literature, Languages and Publishing; Music; Theatre; Film; Equalities and Diversity; Visual Arts; Dance; Place Partnerships and Communities.

<sup>iv</sup> Across the local authorities where cultural trusts exist, their role and function can differ significantly. As such, the type of relationships CS has with them also varies. In some cases the trust has replaced the council as the primary relationship with the area.

<sup>v</sup> Open to individuals and organisations, from £1000 to £100,000, for a period of up to two years

<sup>vi</sup> Creative Places Awards ran up to 2015

<sup>vii</sup> Since 2011 CS has developed 15 Place Partnerships across Scotland, 10 of which are currently still in progress.

<sup>viii</sup> Whilst local authority funding for the arts comprises the larger expenditure, this is also unequally distributed and in steep decline, with total spending by English local authorities on arts and culture (including statutory library services) which has declined by 26% between 2009/10 and 2016/17 with the largest reductions in the East Midlands and North East, of 36%, while the lowest were in the South East (19%) and London (21%) (Britain Thinks, 2018, p.129)

<sup>ix</sup> This report, and a subsequent report, *Place*, (Stark *et al*, 2014), highlighted the disproportionate amount of both core and National Lottery funding to London compared to elsewhere in England. This led to a House of Commons Select Committee on ACE, which in

---

turn resulted in the commitment from ACE to increase funding to 'the regions' to 75% by 2020.

<sup>x</sup> Derry and Belfast take the majority of public funding (Ó Maoláin, 2018)